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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MORALES' NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) President Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party have been very active in the days leading up to and following the start of 2007. On December 30, taking legal advantage of the Congress not being in session, Morales announced the appointment of four interim supreme court justices. Following these questionable appointments, on January 2, Morales criticized the court system as corrupt, called the supreme court justices he had not appointed relics of past governments, and urged judges to cooperate and support the GOB's policies of "change." On New Year's eve the president inaugurated a Venezuelan-financed coca-tea factory in the Chapare region, during which the vice president made statements that the MAS party's revolution will produce results in eight years although Morales' current mandate is only for five. Later, Morales kicked off 2007 with a midnight cabinet meeting where he signed off on five decrees, two of which directly impact the United States. The first decree requires tourist visas for Americans traveling to Bolivia. The second decree calls for Bolivian consulates in the United States to issue undocumented Bolivians "intelligent identification cards" that the GOB says will provide unspecified American health benefits, the ability to open bank accounts, and obtain driver's licenses in the United States. Embassy La Paz was not advised of either measure in advance. The GOB's hectic New Year's pace will continue at least through January 4 and 5 when the MAS will

hold a meeting in Cochabamba to discuss its 2007 strategy and a possible cabinet reshuffling. End Summary.

Full Court Press

¶2. (SBU) On December 30, taking legal advantage of the Congress not being in session, President Morales announced the appointment of four interim supreme court justices. The name of supreme court justices usually requires a two-thirds Congressional approval if Congress is in session. The announcement fills the vacancies of four justices who stepped-down from the court in 2006 after the president had cut their pay as part of government-wide reduction in salaries. The president argued he was forced to appoint new judges because of the extreme delays in Bolivia's judicial system. He also stated his appointments were not MAS loyalists. Opposition leader, and former president, Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga called Morales' appointments an "attack on democracy," and that the judges legally should have been appointed by Congress.

¶3. (SBU) At the January 2 opening of the new judicial year, Morales criticized the court system as corrupt, called the supreme court justices that he did not appoint relics of past governments, and urged judges to cooperate and support the GOB's policies of "change." In a direct verbal attack on the president of the supreme court, Morales stated, "Justice is seen with fear, and as a business (corrupt). . . . If here, Mr. President of the Supreme Court of Justice, you do not feel the changes, the people feel the changes, they feel the social and structural changes." He went on to attack ex-President Rodriguez (and former supreme court president), stating he lied regarding the decommissioning of Chinese MANPADS missiles. Later he suggested that social sector groups hold a summit to discuss judicial reform.

Coca Tea Factory - Seven "MAS" Years?

¶4. (SBU) On New Year's eve President Morales, Vice President Garcia Linera, and the Cuban Ambassador inaugurated a coca "industrialization" plant in the Chapare region. The president announced that both Cuba and Venezuela were contributing to the project. Morales said that Caracas is providing one million USD for the coca-tea plant. He emphasized that the factory was an act of national sovereignty and that Bolivia did not have to ask the United States' permission to industrialize coca. The vice president took the opportunity to outline the GOB's four primary goals for 2007 which include a more efficient bureaucracy, investment in disadvantaged regions, universal social security coverage, and increasing the GOB's share of mining revenues. The vice president then inexplicably made statements that the MAS party's revolution will produce results in eight years, although Morales' current mandate is only for five.

Visas for Americans, "Intelligent Cards" for Bolivians

¶5. (SBU) Morales kicked off 2007 with a January 1 midnight cabinet meeting where he signed off on five decrees, two of which directly impact the United States. The first decree requires tourist visas for Americans traveling to Bolivia. Previously, American tourists could travel to Bolivia visa-free for up to thirty days. Embassy La Paz was not consulted regarding the new visa requirement. On January 2, Juan Ramon Quintana, the Minister of the Presidency, explained the new visa requirement as a matter of reciprocity, national sovereignty, and as a way for the GOB to better protect its citizens. Quintana justified the new visa requirement by citing the 2006 bombing of a La Paz hotel by a mentally unstable American. (Note: The American entered Bolivia on a "World Service Authority Passport," not a United

States passport. End Note). Bolivian companies (especially those involved in tourism) are critical of the GOB's new visa requirement. The press has already noted inconsistencies in the reciprocity argument, noting that Cubans and Venezuelans are not required to get visas even though both countries require visas of Bolivians.

¶6. (SBU) The second decree calls for Bolivian consulates in the United States to issue undocumented Bolivians "intelligent identification cards" that the GOB says will provide unspecified American health benefits, the ability to open bank accounts, and obtain driver's licenses in the United States. The GOB states the cards will cost thirty-five USD. According to Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca, the program will be piloted in the in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Choquehuanca has admitted that no USG authorities were consulted regarding the program.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) In addition to the New Year's day visa and consular card decrees, Morales approved new labor rules and a universal health coverage program. These measures are sure to be popular with his base. The GOB's hectic New Year's pace will continue at least through January 4 and 5 as it holds a meeting in Cochabamba to discuss its 2007 strategy and a possible cabinet reshuffling. The GOB denies a cabinet shake-up is in the works. End Comment.
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